Bay Journal

## Once it was trash but now Masonville is a natural treasure

**Cove, one of only 10 Urban Wildlife Refuges in the nation, has restored nature to a corner of Baltimore.**

Rona Kobell September 25, 2013

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It’s an odd place for a wildlife refuge, this crab claw of a peninsula jutting into the Patapsco River at Baltimore’s southernmost edge. To the south, trucks rumble through the Harbor Tunnel Thruway. To the east, freight trains await their next loads. And just next door, hundreds of new Mercedes-Benz cars from Germany await delivery to well-heeled customers all over the United States.

But Masonville Cove is no ordinary wildlife refuge. Once a dump for debris dating all the way back to the Great Baltimore Fire of 1904, this 54-acre preserve is alive, again — thanks in large part to a $22 million investment from the Port of Baltimore, which will use a portion of the property to house sand and mud dredged from the Inner Harbor and its shipping channels.

Before the Port's work, Masonville Cove was filled with trash, contaminated sediments, concrete and timber. Today, water snakes shimmy along its restored banks, snapping turtles pop their heads up for a snack of minnows, and ducks gather on a sandbar in the shadow of a gorgeous downtown skyline. An environmental education center just off Frankfurst Avenue anchors the new Masonville, complete with a lab and tanks full of creatures that inhabit these waters.

All of that makes it easy to see why the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has named Masonville Cove one of its Urban Wildlife Refuges. It is one of only 10 places nationwide to earn such a designation in a new program the agency is designing to bring wildlife closer to where most people live. Called Conserving the Future, the initiative is a priority of President Barack Obama. In 2011, his administration launched America's Great Outdoors, an effort aimed at connecting more Americans to nature and preserving wild places. Because 80 percent of the public lives in urban areas, the Fish and Wildlife Service undertook its Urban Refuge Initiative, seeking to identify places that can be preserved in urban environments that are accessible to large swaths of the population.

The agency made the announcement in a ceremony at Masonville on Sept. 26. Masonville Cove calls itself "an Urban Wilderness Conservation Area." The project's partners haven't decided if they will change the name to incorporate its new status.

"Masonville just seemed like a great fit," said Genevieve LaRouche, supervisor in the wildlife service's Chesapeake Bay Field Office. She'd learned of Masonville through the agency's work on Poplar Island, where the Port has turned a repository for dredge material into a paradise for herons, turtles and fish.

"What we're trying to do is reach urban youth, which is something we don't do a great job of, because most of our refuges are not that accessible. With Masonville, we have a very strong partnership. It's a very vibrant, well-thought-out partnership."

The partnership began in 2003, when the Port needed to find a new place to house mud and sand dredged from the Inner Harbor. By law, they could only move it locally. In the past, communities hadn't exactly lined up to accept what used to be called "dredge spoils." The Port had spent much of the 1970s in litigation with communities along the Back River over plans to dispose of dredge in Hart-Miller Islands, near Sparrows Point. The case went all the way to the Supreme Court. And though the Port ultimately prevailed, it paid a huge price.

Frank Hamons did not want to endure that again. The longtime deputy director for harbor development for the Port, he sought to convene a team of interested parties — community activists, environmental leaders, politicians and others with an interest in the area's future. The question: If you had to place dredge material, where would you put it?

Masonville was one of the options the team considered. One selling point: The port already owned it. Another: It was in terrible shape, and it would need an entity with deep pockets to clean it up. The Port is a multibillion-dollar agency.

If ever there was a win-win, Hamons thought, this was it. He went to the Brooklyn and Curtis Bay communities for their blessing.

"We said to them, 'we're going to be in your neighborhood if this goes forward. What would you like to get out of this project?' And they said, 'We'd like you to renovate Masonville Cove, and give us access to the water for the first time in 70 years," Hamons recalled.

He added: "These neighborhoods, they are blue collar, with a high percentage of poverty and unemployment. And when we asked them what they wanted, this is what they said. They were thinking about their children's future. Considering all the things they might have asked for, I was really impressed that that is what they asked for."

Where Hart-Miller's evolution was long and acrimonious, Masonville's was relatively quick and smooth. The project had two public hearings; at both, community leaders endorsed it. When the area opened a new public high school, officials named it Benjamin Franklin High School at Masonville Cove.

Now, Living Classrooms runs a first-rate environmental education program, and the National Aquarium of Baltimore runs community events and cleanup days. Every third, fourth and fifth grader in the area will come through the education center. On weekends, Masonville swells with toddlers for programs like "Science Alive for Kids Under Five."

Other organizations in the partnership include staff from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Patuxent Research Refuge near Laurel, the Chesapeake Conservancy in Annapolis and the Baybrook community.

Every so often, a Masonville native comes by to thank the staff for the trasformation. For the staff at the refuge, that is the most rewarding part.

“This is the first time in 80 years that people have had access to the water here,” said Lorraine Andrews Warnick, director of education programs for Living Classrooms at Masonville Cove. “For them to connect back to the cove was very important.”

Myril Johnson is one of those people. Born in 1941, he was raised in a wooden rowhouse in the shadow of the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad, where his grandfather worked. His father worked for one of the large chemical companies in Curtis Bay; his grandmother lived next door. Many of the Masonville men worked for the Union Shipyard Co., which was in the business of scrapping ships.

Johnson swam in Masonville Cove, and he also hiked in the nearby woods and hunted for glass that washed up along the shore. As a boy, he fished for perch.

“It was wonderful,” Johnson said of the 200-resident community. “The most important thing, everyone there took care of everyone else.”

That changed around his 10th birthday. The state highway administration bought the land around Masonville and decided to build Interstate 895 and the Harbor Tunnel Thruway.

The houses were demolished, but the industry stayed. The ship-breaking industry continued to contaminate the land and the water around Masonville. Tires, trash, concrete, timber, sludge, broken glass — it all mingled with the already overwhelming amount of detritus from the Great Fire. Local people still came to fish, following a trail of beer cans they’d carefully placed to navigate the junk.

Johnson, an avid fisherman, has been back to Masonville for the official opening ceremonies. He’s taken his grandson there to fish off one of the new piers. He’s hoping to receive a donation from Bass Pro for fishing equipment and plans to teach a course on how to catch a fish there.

Joel Dunn, director of the Chesapeake Conservancy, has his own vision: A water trail map connecting Masonville to the Jones Falls and John Smith trails with the rest of the Inner Harbor. There is already a place for people to launch kayaks. So a guided or self-guided tour would be a great next step, he said.

“As far as I know, there’s not a watertrail map of the harbor. Nobody’s done the analysis of the best way. So it’s a tremendous opportunity to implement this system and connect the existing parks,” he said. “Getting people out on the water, and having some

interpretation on what they're seeing — I think it builds a sense of appreciation, an adoration, and that builds a constituency for restoration."

Masonville still faces the challenge of letting people know it's there. Most Baltimoreans never knew it existed — either as a dump site or in its restored state — and would never expect to find a wildlife refuge off Frankfurst Avenue in the middle of the city's industrial underbelly. While the toddler programs are popular, weekend drop-in traffic is still slow. More than half of the 5,000 visitors it gets every year come on field trips. And its staff is working with the city and the state to secure a bus stop, though that's complicated because the city is repairing the sewer line on Frankfurst Avenue and doesn't want Masonville to build a sidewalk that city workers will then have to tear up. Work will continue on the site; the Port is planning to refurbish some of the vegetation and renovate the cove's bottom to make better habitat.

But perhaps the biggest benefit, Hamons said, is happening in the hearts and minds of the students who connect to the cove. High school students take internships there; they've been studying the streams and even asked for a trash collector for the debris that washes up during storms. Before Masonville, Hamons said, most of them had no idea how their actions affected the river so nearby — or the Chesapeake.

"In 34 years at the port, I've worked on bigger projects. I've never gotten more satisfaction out of a project," Hamons said. "This is something where we were able to achieve a consensus."